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ABSTRACT

Discursive functions are seldom expressed in an absolutely neutral way. In most cases, various colorings - expressive, affective or social - are superimposed on the utterance by which a function is conveyed. In so far as these colorings are not random shades, but can be regarded as graded nuances within given ranges, selected in order to fit the atmosphere one wishes to create, the term "modulation" seems appropriate to refer to the passage from one nuance to the other, and in particular, from a neutral to a more or less marked realization of the function concerned. Modulation is distinguished from modalization: while the latter modifies the propositional content of an utterance, and may be used as a modulating device, modulation bears on an utterance's illocutionary force. Criteria affecting the realization of a given utterance are described, including the hierarchical and intimate relationships between the participants, the speaker's and hearer's idiolects, and the linguistic environments in which the realization of the function appears. Examples of utterances affected by the mechanisms of modulation are provided. (Author/CLK)

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MELANGES PEDAGOGIQUES 1974

F. ROUSSEL

THE MODULATION OF DISCURSIVE FUNCTIONS

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INTRODUCTION

In his article *Functional diversity in language as seen from a consideration of modality and mood in English*[1], M.A.K. Halliday makes the enlightening point that, whether they assess the probability of the propositional content or express factual conditions on the process referred to in the clause, modal verbs and their semantic equivalents have the same deep structure status, " in both cases we have to do with some kind of qualification of the process expressed in the clause, or rather of the complex of *process* + *participant* " (p. 347). This

[1] *Foundations of Language*, 6, 1970, pp. 322-361.

— going just one step further — we can take to mean that, in both cases, modalisers *indicate the illocutionary potential of the utterance*[2].

Illocutionary potential of modalisers

	MODALISERS (= modals + semantic equivalents)	ILLOCUTIONARY POTENTIAL INDICATED
MODALITY	must (stressed) certain positive rise-fall on a declarative statement	ASSERTION
MODALITY	may, might, can, could possibly perhaps fall-rise on a declarative statement	CONJECTURE
PSEUDO-MODALITY	must should ought to	NECESSARY DEMAND
PSEUDO-MODALITY	may allowed to	PERMISSION

There is, however, another important use of modalisation which should not be overlooked. Indeed, so far, we have been considering modalisation taken at its face value. Very often though, it is used in discourse without any reference to its literal significance. In other words, there are cases where it is not to be taken as either actually assessing the probability of, or expressing conditions on, the process mentioned in the clause, but rather as indicating a concern,

[2] Modalisers can indicate the illocutionary *potential* of the utterance, but not necessarily the illocutionary force this utterance takes on in a particular situation, for this is determined by contextual clues : e.g. in the utterance *He may*, modalisation indicates either that one is making a conjecture or that some kind of permission is being or has been given to the subject. But this utterance can be put to various uses, according to the situation : it can be used to answer a question, to express agreement or on the contrary disagreement with what has just been said, etc. Illocutionary potential and illocutionary force coincide only when modalisers are used as performatives : e.g. *You may go now.*

on the part of the speaker, to set up or maintain a given type of relationship with the hearer or hearers. It may then be said to have an interpersonal, a *relational funciton*[3], as appears from the following exchange. Example 1 :

> *A : Now you see when th-they [the liberals] can sit on the sidelines and make philosophical observations it's a nice position to be in.*
>
> *B : Yes.*
>
> *C [a Liberal] :* Perhaps *this isn't quite a fair criticism because the Concord after all is only a, a small item.*

What C actually means here is *This is an unfair criticism,* but not wanting to appear too staunch a Liberal or to jeopardize his relationship with A, he uses *perhaps* (and *quite*) — which are here clearly void of their literal meaning — purely to attenuate his contradicting move. So in this case, we shall say that modalisation is used to *modulate the illocutionary force of the utterance.*

This brings me to what will be the major concern in this paper : namely, the modulation of discursive functions[4]. I am again indebted to Halliday for this term " modulation ", but it is used here in a totally different sense, which I would like first of all to define and justify.

I. DEFINITION OF MODULATION

Discursive functions are seldom expressed in an absolutely neutral way. In most cases, various colourings — expressive, affective, social colourings — are superimposed on the utterance by which a function is conveyed.

In so far as these colourings are not random shades but can be regarded as graded nuances, within given ranges, selected in order to fit the atmosphere one wishes to create, the term " modulation " seems appropriate to refer to the passage from one nuance to the other, and in particular, from a neutral to a (more or less) marked realization of the function concerned.

[3] " Relational " is taken here in the sense in which it is used by F. Soskin and V. P. John in " The study of spontaneous talk ", in *The Stream of behavior,* ed. by Roger G. Barker, New York, 1963, p. 255.

[4] I wish to thank the members of the Centre de Recherches et d'Applications Pédagogiques en Langues (Nancy), and Timothy Johns, of the University of Birmingham, for their constructive and encouraging remarks.

This passage can be effected in two opposite directions : toning up or toning down.

Note : This affects surface structure only. As far as deep structure is concerned, the illocutionary act remains unchanged. Example 2 :

A : Carelessness, that's what it is
B : Yes

B's utterance is an agreement form. It can be :

— neutral : y e s (mid key[5], falling tone)
— toned up : Y E S (high key, falling or rising-falling tone)
— toned down : yes (low key, fall-rise)

These two types of modulation — toning up or toning down — take on opposite values in an enhancing or, on the contrary, in a disparaging or constraining function.

	Examples	value taken on by toning up modulation	value taken on by toning down modulation
ENHANCING FUNCTIONS	— praise — thanks — agreement	warmer or more diplomatic	less warm or less diplomatic
CONSTRAINING/ DISPARAGING FUNCTIONS	— menace — contradiction — correction — advice — command — requests (for help, confirmation, etc.) — assertion	colder or less diplomatic	less cold or more diplomatic

[5] I would like here to acknowledge my debt to the research on the importance of key carried out by Dr. David Brazil at the University of Birmingham.

II. MODULATION AND MODALISATION

It is necessary, at this stage, to draw a clear distinction between modulation and modalisation. Briefly one can say that modalisation modifies the propositional content of an utterance, while modulation bears on its illocutionary force. As was pointed out in the introduction, modalisation can be used as a modulating device. But of course, as we shall see later on, there are numerous other ways — on the segmental, prosodic and kinesic levels — of achieving the same purpose. Besides, even when modalisation *does* appear in a modulated utterance, it is not necessarily in itself what modulates the illocutionary force. In the previous example we have seen that toned down agreement could be achieved through the use of a falling-rising tone on *yes*, which constitutes a form of modalisation since *yes* + fall-rise equals *possibly*. However, what makes this utterance a toned-down agreement form is not modalisation itself, since in the following exchange the very same utterance would convey *neutral* agreement

Example 3 :

A : *That may be what it is*

B : *Yes* (fall-rise) / *Possibly*

What is relevant here then is the difference in the modalisation of A's statement and B's reaction. According to this, there are three possibilities as regards the function " agreement ".

1) *B's statement is more tentative than A's :*
toned down agreement
(cf. ex. 2 with a fall-rise on *yes)*

2) *B's statement is as tentative (or categorical) as A's :*
neutral agreement
(cf. ex. 3)

3) *B's statement is less tentative than A's :*
toned up agreement
Example 4 :
A : That may be what it is
B : Oh I'm sure it's so

Note : In 1) and 3), instead of respectively weak and strong agreement, the function of B's utterance would be *correction* if precisely this difference in modalisation, however tenuous it might be, was presented as pertinent by B.

This brief analysis of modulation in the case of agreement shows that the two notions of modulation and modalisation have to be kept separate ; it also points at a difficult problem which cannot be passed over in a study of modulation : that of defining a neutral realization of a given function.

III. DEFINITION OF A NEUTRAL REALIZATION OF A GIVEN DISCURSIVE FUNCTION

Toning up and toning down can be considered only by reference to a neutral realization of the function concerned. Such a neutral realization is not easy to define, for any realization can in turn appear neutral or marked, according to the socio-cultural and the linguistic backgrounds against which it is perceived.

Thus many criteria must be taken into account. Among the most determining ones are : the hierarchical and intimate relationships between the participants, the speaker's and hearer's idiolects, and the linguistic environment in which the realization of the function appears.

1. Hierarchical relationship

Three possibilities must be envisaged here according to whether one is, is not, or is not quite, in a position to express the function concerned.

a) If one is in a position of authority [4] to express this function, the neutral realization will be either a performative formula if there is one, or the syntactical structure(s) commonly associated with the function concerned, for example :

— the imperative mood
— must, ... } for a command

— a direct interrogative structure, in the case of a request for information.

Any other structure than the one(s) expected in the given situational context would be a modulation and would produce a particular effect (a command issued by a sergeant to a private, starting with " Would you be so kind as to... ", would most probably be interpreted as sarcastic).

[4] See Ducrot, O. — *Dire et ne pas dire*. Paris, Hermann, 1972, p. 79.

b) if one is not at all in a social position to express this function, any realization will be felt to be out of place.

c) In the intermediate area where one is not really in a position of authority over the interlocutor but can take the liberty to express the function concerned, the second criterion becomes determining.

2. Degree of intimacy

The neutral form will then be that which corresponds as closely as possible to the degree of familiarity, of intimacy, existing between the interlocutors in the given situation. For example :

- — intimate links → a toned up form of an enhancing function
- — familiar relationships → an unattenuated version of a disparaging or constraining function
- — more distant relationships → a toned down version of a disparaging or constraining function.

3. The speaker's and hearer's idiolects

Realizations which are most customary to the speaker and to the hearer are neutral in their respective systems, however marked they might objectively appear.

4. Linguistic environment

An utterance can be interpreted as a neutral, toned up or toned down realization, according to preceding (or following) utterances of the interlocutor (cf. the difference between examples 2 and 3) or of the same speaker. Thus, for agreement :

yes, [yes] → toned up

YES, [yes] → toned down

From all this it appears that a neutral realization is a complex and necessarily somewhat subjective notion, which can be defined only within a precisely delimited socio-cultural and linguistic background.

IV. A TONED DOWN VERSION OF A CONSTRAINING OR DISPARAGING FUNCTION

In order to get a clearer insight into the mechanisms of modulation, let us now try and find out what is implied, for example, by a toned down version of a constraining or disparaging function.

1. Devices

a) Either *the segmental part remains unchanged* and modulation affects :

— *prosody*

A reproach, for instance, can be presented as a mere request for information by changing the place of the tonic and, optionally, by using a different tone :

Where have you been ↘ becomes *Where have you been* ↗ or ↘

— *voice quality*

Modulation usually implies a change in voice quality. This is particularly noticeable in the case of reproach or criticism ;

— *kinesics*

A questioning look may indicate that the statement one is making is to be interpreted as an unobtrusive request for confirmation.

b) Or *one modifies the segmental part as well :*

— by removing or replacing elements which could appear abrupt or unpleasant (*understatement*) ;

— by placing a " *buffer* " *element* in front of the segment (an apparent agreement form preceding a contradiction, or a list of justifications preceding a refusal) ;

— by adding modalisers or phrase expressing a *reservation (I wonder if I'm not mistaken, unless you've got something else to do).*

2. Indirection

It seems that what is modified by modulation is always the Searlian preparatory condition of the illocutionary act[7]; the essential condition itself remaining unchanged.

a) If we take the case of *assertion*, the preparatory condition, in Searle's terms, is that " *S* [the speaker] has evidence (reasons, etc.) for the truth of *P* [the proposition he is making] " *(Speech acts*, p. 52). This implication is what makes assertion a fairly constraining act for the hearer since evidence bars contradiction. By giving it the appearance of a conjecture, of a tentative statement, modulation neutralizes the authoritative attitude implied, suggests interest in the hearer's viewpoint and opens the way to possible refutation.

b) Giving an *order*, and, to a lesser extent, *requesting* the interlocutor to take some action, presuppose that one is in a position of authority. Here again modulation diminishes or eliminates this impression, as is shown by the graded possibilities of modulating an order (into an apparent request, suggestion or statement).

c) In a similar way *a request for information* loses its authoritative quality when modulated into a modalised statement, since it then reveals the speaker's uncertain state of mind without placing the hearer under a manifest obligation to react.

d) *Advice* implies that the speaker is more aware of what is in the hearer's interest than the hearer himself. In this it is somewhat disparaging, besides being slightly constraining.

Once turned into an apparent suggestion, or a fortiori into a seemingly straightforward statement, it no longer has these unpleasant connotations for the hearer.

e) *Correction*, and of course *contradiction*, imply that one considers one's own judgement superior to that of the person one is correcting or contradicting (whether it be the interlocutor or a third party).

[7] See Searle, J.R. — *Speech acts*. Cambridge University Press, 1969, p. 52.

A contradicting move appears less obtrusive when introduced by the phrase *I would have thought*, since the use of the past conditional seems to imply that one has perhaps changed one's mind. In example 1 (*Perhaps this isn't quite a fair criticism*), the contradiction is toned down in two different ways : *perhaps* presents it as tentative, and *quite* apparently turns it into a partial correction.

Correction itself can in turn be modulated into partial agreement, and thus into an enhancing function (e.g. *This isn't always true* > *This is true in most cases)*. Correction is then implicit *(But there are cases when it isn't)*.

f) *Criticism* of the interlocutor has the same implication as correction and contradiction, except that it is even more evident. Expressed in a bantering tone, it loses its harsh quality (note that irony would have the reverse effect).

It can also be modulated into a laudatory comment on someone else, since, according to Ducrot's law of exhaustivity, praising one part of a whole implies criticism of the rest[8].

Criticism is then implicit, besides being indirect if this laudatory comment is expressed to a third party.

In all these cases, it appears that whether modulation involves :

a) an apparent passage to a less disparaging or constraining, or even to an enhancing, function ;

b) a recourse to an implicit signification (cf. the various uses to which a seemingly straightforward and innocent statement can be put) ;

c) or the use of an ambivalent statement addressed to a third party,

it is fundamentally based on *indirection*.

V. HOW TO DISTINGUISH A MODULATED VERSION OF FUNCTION X FROM A NEUTRAL VERSION OF FUNCTION Y ?

1. Surface difference

Surface structures can be absolutely identical. In fact this identity — or potential identity — may well be essential to the existence of modulation, for if a modulated form inevitably gave itself away as such, modulation would lose its raison d'être.

[8] Op. cit., pp. 134-135.

Then what allows one to tell what function is probably being expressed is such criteria as the (social, professional...) position of the speaker, associated with situational clues. If, for example, the hearer has some reason to think that the speaker actually possesses the information he is expressing in a tentative way, he may guess that the speaker is in fact making a toned down assertion, out of a concern to be considerate, and not a conjecture. In the same way, a maid is likely to interpret an apparent suggestion made by her employers as a disguised order.

2. Essential difference

Whereas the difference between a neutral and a modulated version of function X is limited to surface structure (the impact expected by the speaker is the same), the difference between a modulated version of function X and a neutral version of function Y affects deep structure (and surface structures are likely to be identical).

CONCLUSION : POLYVALENCE AND AMBIGUITY

Modulation is a phenomenon which rests fundamentally on the non-biunivocal relationship between form and function. Indeed, what makes modulation possible is the polyvalence of structures, which can :

a) have one or more implicit significations besides their explicit meaning, according to the context,

b) be used to express various functions.

If it allows for great subtlety, this polyvalence of structures is also a source of ambiguity, and the subtler the game becomes, the greater are the risks of misunderstanding.

Very often, for example, the hearer is unable to tell :

— a modulated version of function X from a neutral version of function Y,

— diplomatic from sincere modulation,

— or ingratiating modulation from modulation reflecting a social concern to be considerate.

This threefold ambiguity can be regarded as a necessary — and often regrettable — consequence of modulation (leading one, for example, to express sincere feelings through actions rather than language).

But it is also part of its very essence, for modulating often means playing with ambiguity, taking refuge behind it for personal or social reasons. It is significant, in this light, that modalisers, which can be used to disguise the illocutionary potential of an utterance, are the very elements which normally serve to make it explicit.

Now, as modulation is a pervading phenomenon in discourse — few realizations appearing perfectly neutral — one can see how it contributes no less than the necessarily subjective interpretation of lexical items to the fundamental misunderstanding of language. It gives us another reason to think with S. Pit Corder that " we have to make the best interpretation we can. We have to accept living with uncertainty "[9].

[9] " Interpretive procedures : seeing, reading and understanding discourse ", communication read at the 3rd Neuchâtel Colloquium in Applied Linguistics, May 1974.